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NEA/ELA AND NEA/PPD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/02/2020
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SUBJECT: JORDAN: COLUMNIST MISCHARACTERIZES U.S. POSITION
ON REFORM

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) On February 2, Fahd Al-Khitan, a columnist and managing editor of Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm, wrote a bizarre column entitled, "Jordanian-American understandings on the limits of reform." Khitan referred to visits by several U.S. officials over the past several weeks, including NEA DAS Wittes and a Millennium Challenge Corporation delegation. Khitan asserted that the meetings between Jordanian and American officials were "candid and clear," particularly when it came to amending the election law "in a manner that allows full representation for Jordanians of Palestinian origin." Visitors also mentioned women's rights and freedom of expression, he noted.

¶2. (SBU) Khitan alleged there was a "long discussion" about these issues and that the Jordanians talked profusely about the "repercussions of altering the demographic representation in Parliament." Khitan then stated that efforts to explain the Jordanian point of view "resulted in an unprecedented American understanding of those repercussions and consideration," arguing that the Jordanians "found support from U.S. Ambassador Stephen Beecroft, who came to a different and more realistic conclusion, in view of his living the Jordanian reality, compared with that long-distance reality of officials in Washington."

¶3. (SBU) Khitan argued that the visiting officials realized that the "realistic alternative--and the one that is possible--is taking gradual steps towards reform, especially in relation to the election law, and avoiding quick leaps, because the results will be catastrophic for Jordan and its internal unity." Khitan concluded that the Jordanian government was now "free of external pressures and could continue its plans to develop the election law in a manner that corresponds to the Jordanian national interest and the needs for political reform."

¶4. (C) A good columnist contact meeting Feb. 2 with Info Specialist mentioned the column and said that she and Khitan had recently visited a minister for a readout on the future of reforms here and whether the U.S. was pressuring Jordan on specific issues. The minister, whom the contact did not identify, gave a readout that corresponded closely to the assertions in Khitan's column. Info Specialist concluded from other details of the conversation that the source was likely Minister for Political Development Musa Maaytah.

¶5. (C) Comment: Khitan is generally viewed by Jordanians as a right-wing East Banker who opposes expanding rights and privileges to Jordanians of Palestinian origin. Many Jordanians also believe Khitan is used by conservative elements of the GOJ and its intelligence service to test political messages through his writing. In those respects, the column, which is almost wholly inaccurate, reflects wishful thinking. If Maaytah was the source of Khitan's article, he may have been making a characteristically awkward

attempt to throw off the columnist from pursuing a storyline about U.S. pressure for reforms. The GOJ has very actively sought to avoid the impression that it is under outside pressure to make politically unpopular changes in the way it does business. The Ambassador and staff will continue to press vigorously--including with Maaytah--on the need for a free, transparent election law, expanded rights for women, and freedom of expression.

¶6. (SBU) Background: Al-Arab Al-Yawm is an independent daily that regularly takes editorial stands critical of the government and that highlights the views of Jordan's opposition.

Beecroft